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ABSTRACT

A faculty mentor is that person in the university theatre department who initiates students into not only the world of subject matter but also the world of scholarly and academic action. A mentor trains a "thinker of the theatre" to take a place in the intelligentsia that is responsible for producing art and retaining the stewardship of artistic and humanistic values. A mentor recognizes those special qualities in a student that are manifested in his or her class work, performance on stage, and attitude toward work. During the course of study the mentor/student relationship involves a mutual process, in which the learning that takes place is gradually reversed: the more the student learns, the more he or she provides information to the mentor, who, in turn, channels more information back to the student--a process resulting in far more learning than that of conventional dissertation assignments. When this process of mutual inquiry takes place, the student is on the way to becoming a mentor in his or her own right. Often the mentor/student relationship continues beyond completion of a degree, and the two continue to share ideas as the student chooses. (HTH)

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THE NECESSITY OF THE FACULTY MENTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARTIST-SCHOLAR

William R. Elwood

As we know, Mentor was a friend of Odysseus put in charge of his household and became a sagacious advisor. In German universities the more academic designation is Doktorvater, thus adding the element of some sort of fatherly guidance to the term. Generally speaking, a mentor is that faculty person in the University Theatre Department who guides his students through the process of acquiring the knowledge and training a student needs. Some people prefer the term, major professor, but in my judgment a major professor is simply the designated faculty member who oversees the graduate student's program, and directs the doctoral dissertation. He does not provide those qualities which I hope to articulate today of the mentor. A mentor clearly directs a doctoral dissertation and helps his student schedule a program of study, but a mentor does more. It is his function to initiate his student not only into the world of subject matter, but into the world of scholarly and academic action. A mentor who does his job clearly must realize that he is training a thinker of the theatre to take his or her place in that part of the intelligentsia that is responsible for not only producing art, but retaining the stewardship of artistic and humanistic values. Many would disagree with my view. I call those people the "work permit" contingent. They see the doctorate as a "work permit" which will gain them life-long employment if they play their cards right. In many ways perhaps we need a certain number of each group in university theatres today, the kind of work that can sustain the academic unit legislatively. Without thinkers, planners and visionaries however, clearly there would be no academic unit to maintain. In fact, I have been a major professor for those students who wish only the "work

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Permit". They are forced to listen to my obligatory lecture on vision and the humanizing influence of the theatre. However, if in the end they choose to secure a "work Permit", I assist them so long as they maintain the appropriate grade point and fulfill the stated requirements. I even go so far as to assist them in finding a job, and my feelings of loyalty for the institution that pays my salary usually dictates that I try to get "our" people placed, that is, the Wisconsin graduate is eminently more employable than the others. There my obligation ends. For the student has his "work Permit" and is employed. Except for an occasional letter of recommendation I don't work with the student again.

I quote Marrou in his A HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN ANTIQUITY:

> For a long time the opinion of antiquity was to despise the teacher who made a business out of teaching and offered his learning to the first customer who came along. The communication of knowledge it was believed should be reserved for those who were worthy of it. (p. 33). (Marrou, 10/1/80).

Being a mentor therefore implies a deeper form of training; concerning oneself with initiating the student into a subject matter whose existence and perpetuation is essential to civilization. If any in this audience have heard other papers of mine they know this is a recurrent theme in my works and I will not dwell on it here. Suffice it to say that theatrical activities are, in my opinion, never mere entertainment or diversion. They are signal manifestations of the health of a culture.

The mentor then through his own training, and from his own mentors, recognizes those special qualities in a student which are manifested in his class work, in his performance on stage, and more importantly, in his attitude toward his work. He then observes the student to see if the personality configurations between him and the student will mesh. There has to be a minimum of resistance to learning, and a maximum of patience

to teach for the mentor/student relationship to function properly. It is not only that a student has to demonstrate his willingness to learn; the mentor must feel deeply that he is willing to expend the energy which the process of teaching requires.

Once the mentor realizes that the external criteria are intact and that the interpersonal dynamics are conducive, he conducts one final test which distinguishes our era from that of antiquity. Simple as it may seem, but important in one form or another: he asks the student if he is interested in working together to train the student and to assure him a place in the field that will enable the student to make significant contributions to society, and which will ensure the continuity of such a master/apprentice relationship. This form of inquiry is often reversed. That is to say, the student asks the professor if he will function as mentor, in which case the mentor directly or indirectly, concretely or abstractly, outlines the conditions of the relationship. The conditions of the relationship may differ in the minor details, how the program of study is to be carried out, but essentially there is an agreement that the subject matter to be studied is not only worthwhile but central to the survival of civilization. The training therefore (choice of courses, foreign language to be studied, etc.), is secondary to the central issue. One can seek to sustain civilization with a study of 19th century German Theatre as easily as with the study of Edward Albee. The commitment to be made is that the field is integral to the human condition, and as one of my colleagues in classics indicated, there comes into being an institutionalized bond of affection.

During the course of study it becomes increasingly clear that a mentor/student relationship involves a mutual process. The mentor brings

to the relationship his knowledge, back-ground and experiences. He directs the student to important sources of information, he provides counsel regarding artistic committments and activities and oversees his work. Students of mine who were in this relationship, or displayed a potential for this relationship, were often surprised when I collared them in the hallway and expressed dismay for example, that they had cut a class. Normally at the University level I don't concern myself with attendance, but when I am a mentor for a student I am carefully monitoring not only his academic work but also, his attitudes.

These activities and responsibilities are still somewhat close to my category of "major Professor", but an interesting phenomenon occurs in a mentor/student relationship. The process by which the learning takes place is gradually reversed. The mentor teaches the student and the information which the student gains becomes shared on a more equal basis. The more the student learns, the more he is interested in providing information to the mentor, and the more the mentor learns the more information he is interested in channeling back to the student. A senior/junior team forms and mutual inquiry takes place. The result is exciting, for in the process more about the field is learned than could ever be learned by assignments or for example, making two dissertations the requirement (God forbid!).

When this decisive process of mutual inquiry takes place it is my firm conviction that not only is data amassed (we learn about a heretofore undiscovered German theatre company, for example), but we have plugged in to a level of knowledge that is transcendent. When that happens the student is already launched to become a mentor in his, or her, own right. We are in fact, perceiving more clearly the world of ideas through the lens of

one art form--the theatre. Once this occurs the greater understanding of not only the object of immediate investigation but of life itself occurs. This sounds high-flown and grandiose but I fail to see any other purpose for the pursuit of knowledge than a greater understanding of life.

The artist/scholar dimension of this subject is expanded to include practical aspects of the art. It is more than agreeing that a doctoral student shall take a major role in the play, it is the examination of theories in practice, and in some cases the testing of theories in a particular artistic exercise. This data and this inquiry when properly conducted is integrated into the subject matter which further reinforces a greater understanding of life. I enjoy frivolous and diversionary theatre as much as anyone, but I have never considered such theatre to be the core of the art form any more than I consider the example of personal frivolity to be a definition of total personality.

In conclusion, I can say that this mentor/student relationship continues on beyond completion of a degree. Clearly the mentor continues to write letters of recommendation if they are required, and the mentor sees that the student is given further responsibility at the national level, etc. More importantly however, the mentor and the student continue to share ideas, admitting that there is a gradual diminution of contact in the same way a child gradually diminishes his contact with his parent as he stands on his own. But as a child may maintain contact with his parent to share experiences periodically, so may the mentor and student. To be specific, I had an opportunity to teach with my student at her college and share my ideas with her, and watch how her own professional style had evolved both in the class room and in the production she had

directed. She had the opportunity to examine my professional activities and to see how that had evolved in a lecture demonstration and in classroom work. By my own definition such a relationship takes time and I can be a major professor to many students, but a mentor to few. This process is self-selecting however, since many students choose not to have such a relationship. It is in my opinion, at the core of the learning process on the graduate level. And it is at the core of meaningful and productive inquiry into the world of ideas.

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